How Washington Sees China: Bipartisan Framing and Strategic Implications

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1 Introduction

China has emerged as the central long-term strategic challenge shaping contemporary U.S. foreign policy debates. While a growing bipartisan consensus exists in Washington that China represents a major competitor to American power and influence, substantial differences remain in how political elites interpret and articulate the nature of that challenge. These differences are reflected not only in policy proposals but also, critically, in the language and narratives employed by lawmakers in public discourse.

Understanding how China is framed in Congressional speeches is important because elite rhetoric plays a consequential role in shaping policy priorities and strategic signaling. The specific terms and concepts used by lawmakers—such as those emphasizing competition, threat, values, national security, economic dependence, or systemic rivalry—carry distinct policy implications. Such keywords signal how China is understood within U.S. strategic thinking, influence which policy tools are prioritized, and communicate U.S. intentions to allies, adversaries, and third-party states. Divergent partisan framing can therefore introduce ambiguity into U.S. strategic messaging, complicating alliance coordination and encouraging hedging behavior in the international system.

This project analyzes speeches delivered during the 2025 session of the United States Congress to examine how Democratic and Republican lawmakers frame China across partisan lines. Rather than focusing solely on policy outcomes or voting behavior, the study centers on elite political discourse, treating Congressional speeches as a key venue through which strategic narratives are articulated, contested, and reinforced. Using systematic text-based analysis, including natural language processing techniques, the report identifies recurrent keywords and framing patterns, assesses the policy implications associated with these rhetorical choices, and highlights areas of convergence and divergence between the two parties. In doing so, the analysis provides insight into how Congressional discourse on China shapes broader U.S. strategic competition and global alignment dynamics.

2 Conceptual Framework: Framing, Strategic Language, and Policy Signaling

This study adopts a framing-based approach to analyze how U.S. political elites interpret and communicate the challenge posed by China. In political discourse, *framing* refers to the ways in which actors select, emphasize, and organize language to define problems, attribute causes, and suggest appropriate responses. Frames do not merely describe reality; they shape how policymakers, publics, and external audiences understand strategic environments and policy options.

In the context of U.S.–China relations, framing is particularly consequential because China represents a long-term, multifaceted challenge spanning security, economic, technological, and ideological domains. How China is described—whether as a *strategic competitor*, *systemic rival*, *security threat*, or *ideological adversary*—carries distinct implications for policy priorities and acceptable tools of statecraft. As a result, elite rhetoric serves as an important intermediary between underlying strategic conditions and concrete policy decisions.

2.1 Keywords as Indicators of Strategic Interpretation

This report treats recurring keywords and phrases in Congressional speeches as observable indicators of broader strategic frames. Terms such as *competition*, *threat*, *deterrence*, *values*, *national security*, *economic dependence*, and *rules-based order* are not neutral descriptors; they encode assumptions about China's intentions, the nature of international politics, and the appropriate U.S. response. For example, language emphasizing *competition* and *guardrails* suggests an interpretation of U.S.–China relations as a managed rivalry within an interconnected system, while language centered on *existential threat* or *civilizational struggle* implies a more zero-sum and confrontational worldview.

By examining the frequency and co-occurrence of such terms, this study seeks to identify dominant narrative patterns within and across parties. Importantly, the analysis does not assume that individual keywords independently determine policy outcomes. Instead, keywords are interpreted in context, as part of broader rhetorical structures that reveal how lawmakers conceptualize China and the strategic environment.

2.2 Framing, Policy Priorities, and Strategic Signaling

Framing matters not only for domestic debate but also for international signaling. Congressional discourse influences how allies, partners, and competitors interpret U.S. intentions and resolve. Consistent framing across political actors can reinforce credibility and reduce uncertainty, while divergent or conflicting narratives may generate ambiguity. For U.S. allies, such ambiguity can complicate coordination and long-term planning, potentially encouraging hedging behavior. For China and other strategic competitors, elite rhetoric provides cues about U.S. threat perceptions, red lines, and willingness to escalate or cooperate.

Within the domestic context, framing shapes which policy tools are viewed as legitimate or urgent. Narratives emphasizing institutional reform and rule enforcement tend to prioritize multilateral engagement and economic statecraft, whereas frames centered on ideological confrontation or national survival are more likely to elevate military deterrence, technological decoupling, and coercive measures. Thus, rhetorical framing serves as a bridge between abstract strategic assessments and concrete policy agendas.

2.3 Analytical Implications

By grounding the analysis in framing theory and strategic language, this study moves beyond simple counts of pro- or anti-China sentiment. Instead, it examines how bipartisan discourse structures the meaning of China as a policy problem and how those meanings translate into strategic implications. This approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of both partisan divergence and convergence, highlighting not only where Democrats and Republicans differ in emphasis, but also where shared language points to an emerging consensus about China's role in the international system.

3 Data and Methodology

This study examines how members of the United States Congress frame China in public discourse by analyzing speeches delivered during the 2025 Congressional session. Congressional speeches are treated as a key source of elite political communication, reflecting how lawmakers publicly interpret strategic challenges, articulate priorities, and signal policy intentions related to China.

3.1 Data Collection and Corpus Construction

Rather than collecting the full universe of Congressional speeches, this study focuses exclusively on speeches that explicitly reference China. The data collection process first identifies and downloads only those speech files that contain China-related keywords, including *China*, *Chinese*, *PRC*, and *Beijing*. This targeted approach ensures that the dataset is directly relevant to China-focused discourse and avoids the inclusion of unrelated legislative rhetoric.

For each selected speech, all sentences containing China-related keywords are extracted and treated as the unit of analysis. Sentence-level extraction allows the analysis to isolate China-specific framing within speeches that may otherwise address multiple policy topics. This approach reduces noise from

unrelated content and enables a more precise examination of how China is discussed across different political contexts. All extracted sentences from both parties are then combined to form a unified corpus of China-related Congressional discourse.

Each sentence in the corpus is labeled according to the party affiliation of the speaker, allowing for subsequent comparison between Democratic and Republican framing while maintaining a consistent analytical foundation.

3.2 Text Processing and TF–IDF Analysis

The analysis employs a text-based approach incorporating natural language processing (NLP) techniques to identify salient language patterns. A term frequency–inverse document frequency (TF–IDF) model is fitted on the full, unified corpus of China-related sentences. Fitting the model on the complete corpus establishes a shared vocabulary and weighting scheme, ensuring that all comparisons across parties are conducted within the same feature space.

Using this common TF–IDF framework, term salience is examined at three levels: (1) the overall corpus of China-related Congressional discourse, (2) sentences spoken by Democratic lawmakers, and (3) sentences spoken by Republican lawmakers. For each level, TF–IDF scores are aggregated to identify the top 20 most salient terms. These terms are interpreted as indicators of dominant concepts and emphases associated with China-related discourse in each group. By relying on a shared TF–IDF model rather than fitting separate models for each party, the analysis avoids distortions introduced by differing vocabularies or inverse document frequency weights and enables direct, interpretable comparison of partisan language use.

3.3 Interpretation Strategy

The methodology prioritizes transparency and interpretability over model complexity. TF–IDF is selected because it provides a clear and intuitive measure of term importance while remaining accessible to policy audiences. Quantitative results are not treated as definitive conclusions on their own; instead, identified keywords are interpreted in relation to their surrounding textual context to capture their rhetorical meaning and policy implications.

This combined quantitative–qualitative approach allows the study to move beyond simple word counts and toward an analysis of strategic framing. By examining which terms are emphasized overall and which are selectively highlighted by each party, the study sheds light on how Democratic and Republican lawmakers differ in their characterization of China and the strategic challenges it poses. The resulting findings are then linked to broader implications for U.S. policy priorities, strategic signaling, and global alignment dynamics.

4 Results

4.1 Descriptive Overview of the China-Related Corpus

This section presents descriptive results from the China-related Congressional speech corpus. From a total of 1,198 Congressional documents, 6,292 sentences containing explicit references to China were identified and extracted. These sentences collectively form a sentence-level, China-filtered corpus, which serves as the empirical foundation for all subsequent text analysis.

The corpus spans a wide range of legislative contexts, including national security, trade, technology, foreign policy, and industrial policy. Rather than treating entire speeches as analytical units, the sentence-level construction allows the analysis to focus directly on substantive China-related discourse, minimizing noise from unrelated legislative language.

Across the corpus, China is most frequently referenced in connection with geopolitical competition, regime characteristics, security concerns, and technological rivalry. Preliminary frequency analysis indicates that terms related to political authority, military power, and international competition appear prominently, suggesting that Congressional attention to China is framed less as a narrow economic issue and more as a multidimensional strategic challenge.

This descriptive overview establishes the scale, structure, and thematic breadth of the corpus, providing the basis for subsequent analysis of keyword salience and partisan framing differences between Democratic and Republican legislators.
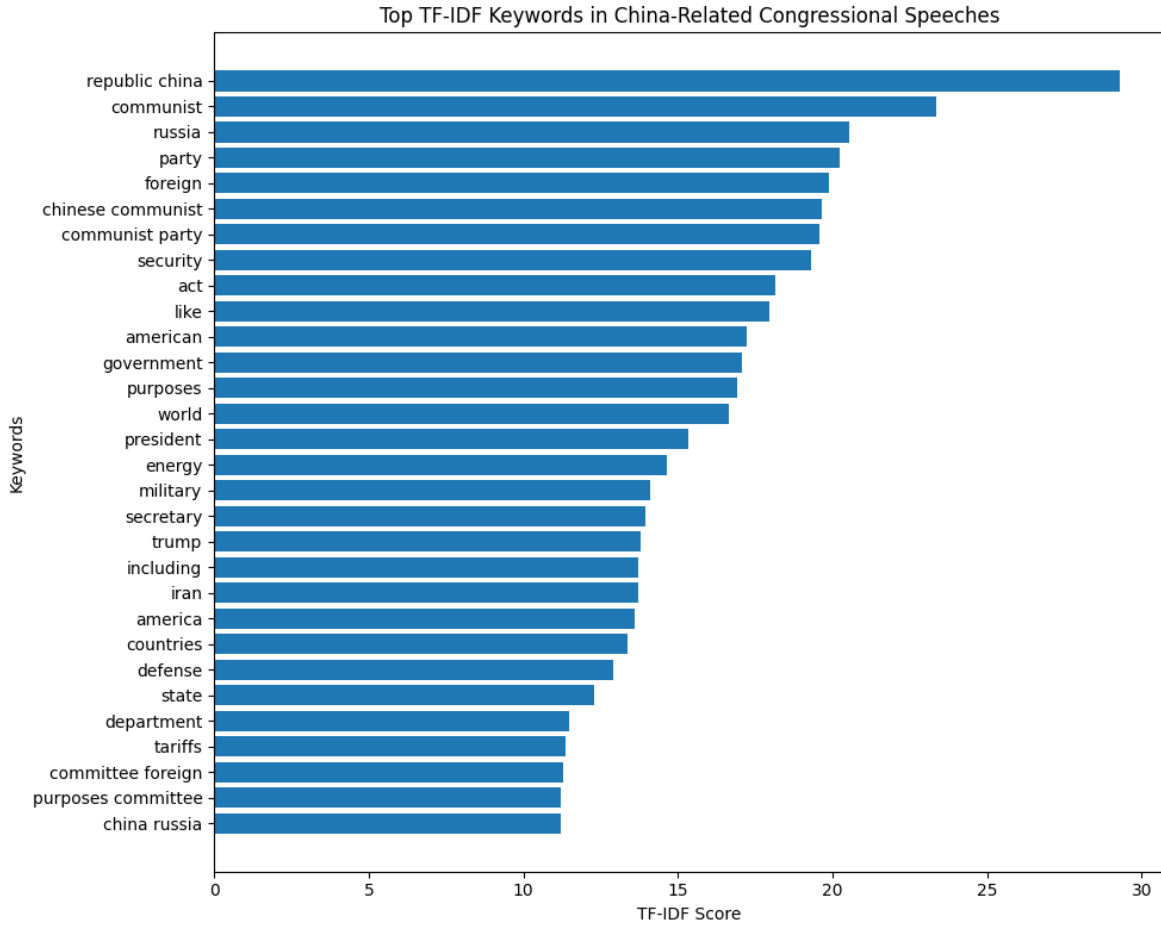
Figure 1: Top tf-idf Keywords for China-related Congress speeches

4.2 Overall Keyword Salience in China-Related Congressional Discourse

Analysis of the TF–IDF-weighted keywords across all China-related Congressional speeches reveals a discourse dominated by regime-centered and security-oriented framing. High-weighted terms such as *"communist," "Chinese Communist Party," "security,"* and *"military"* indicate that lawmakers consistently conceptualize China as a systemic challenger rooted in its governing structure rather than as a conventional economic or diplomatic partner. This framing suggests that China is primarily interpreted through the lens of political regime type and long-term strategic competition.

Regime-related language plays a central role in structuring Congressional narratives. Repeated references to the Communist Party emphasize ideological authoritarianism, centralized state control, and the inseparability of China's political system from its economic, technological, and military behavior. Chinese firms, technologies, and investments are frequently portrayed as operating under direct or indirect Party influence, reinforcing concerns about national security, governance risks, and strategic dependence. As a result, competition with China is framed as structural and enduring rather than contingent on discrete policy disagreements.

National security considerations further dominate the discourse. Keywords related to security, defense, military power, and executive authority appear prominently, indicating that economic issues such as trade, energy, and technology are consistently discussed in relation to strategic vulnerability and resilience. Rather than treating economic interdependence as a neutral or mutually beneficial condition, Congressional rhetoric frames it as a potential liability that must be managed through safeguards, controls, and risk mitigation.

China is also frequently situated within a broader constellation of perceived adversarial states. The co-occurrence of terms such as *"Russia," "Iran,"* and *"foreign"* suggests that lawmakers often embed China within a wider authoritarian bloc that challenges the U.S.-led international order. This framing links U.S.–China competition to global geopolitical instability and reinforces the perception of interconnected threats rather than isolated bilateral disputes.

Finally, references to senior executive officials and institutions—such as *"president," "secretary,"* and *"department"*—highlight the importance of inter-branch coordination in managing China policy. Congressional discourse frequently invokes executive authority to legitimize threat assessments and justify policy responses including export controls, sanctions, and alliance coordination. Overall, the keyword structure reflects a bipartisan convergence toward viewing China as a long-term strategic rival defined by regime characteristics, security implications, and systemic competition.

4.3 Democratic Party Framing of China: Global Influence, Soft Power, and Systemic Competition

Democratic Party discourse on China prioritizes the preservation of U.S. global influence and leadership within the international system. The TF–IDF results for Democratic Party speeches indicate a framing that emphasizes engagement, credibility, and long-term international positioning rather than narrow bilateral confrontation. High-weighted terms such as *"leadership," "abroad," "USAID,"* and *"clean"* suggest that Democratic lawmakers consistently situate China-related issues within debates over U.S. presence and influence across global institutions and regions. China is framed less as an isolated adversary and more as a competitor operating within—and potentially reshaping—global political, economic, and institutional structures.

A defining feature of Democratic China discourse is the embedding of China within broader global security and geopolitical contexts. Keywords such as *"Russia," "Russia–China," "Ukraine," "North Korea,"* and *"nuclear"* appear prominently, indicating that China is frequently discussed alongside other authoritarian or revisionist actors. Rather than treating China as a standalone challenge, Democratic lawmakers frame it as part of a wider constellation of global instability and systemic competition. This framing underscores the importance of coordinated, multilateral responses and reinforces the view that effective China policy must be embedded within broader alliance and security strategies.

Economic instruments in Democratic rhetoric are primarily evaluated through their effects on global coordination and U.S. leadership rather than as tools of economic nationalism. References to *"tariffs," "tariffs China,"* and *"percent"* appear frequently, but they are typically discussed in a critical or evaluative context. Democratic discourse often emphasizes the downstream consequences of tariff-based strategies, including disruptions to global supply chains, strain on allied economies, and reduced U.S. leverage in international negotiations. This suggests that economic statecraft is viewed as a means of reinforcing global leadership and cooperation, not as an end in itself.

Democratic lawmakers frame unilateral policy actions associated with figures such as Trump and Elon Musk as risks to U.S. soft power and international credibility. References to *"Trump"* and *"Elon Musk"* reflect concern that aggressive tariff strategies or efforts to weaken institutions such as USAID undermine U.S. diplomatic presence and development leadership abroad. High-profile business or policy decisions are portrayed as having geopolitical consequences when they reduce U.S. engagement in sensitive international domains. Democratic discourse consistently suggests that such actions create strategic vacuums in development assistance, technological cooperation, and global governance—vacancies that China is well-positioned to fill through expanded investment and diplomatic outreach.

Soft power and non-coercive instruments are presented as central pillars of Democratic competition with China. Keywords such as *"USAID," "abroad," "clean,"* and *"leadership"* reflect a belief that long-term competition will be shaped by the United States' ability to offer attractive alternatives in development, clean energy, and institutional governance. Rather than relying primarily
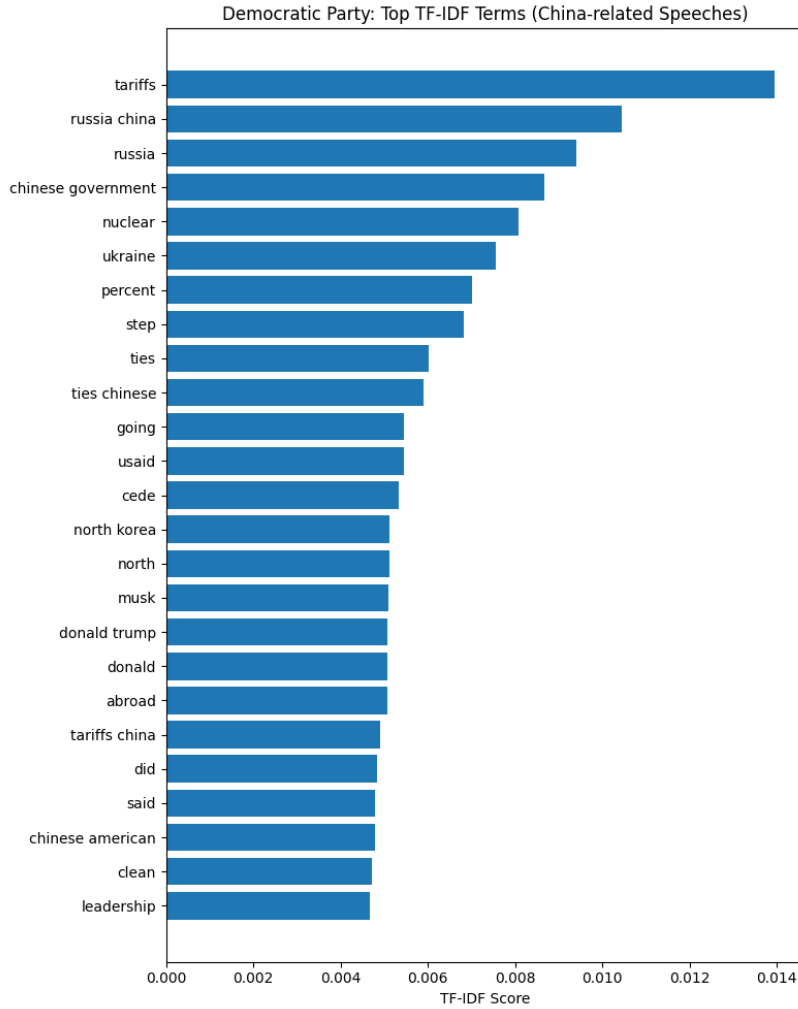
Figure 2: Top tf-idf words from the Democratic Party

on confrontation or exclusion, Democratic discourse highlights development assistance, environmental leadership, and international cooperation as key mechanisms for countering China's expanding influence, particularly in the Global South.

Explicit ideological confrontation and human rights framing are comparatively de-emphasized in Democratic China-related discourse. Instead, the Democratic Party emphasizes maintaining international influence through soft power, coalition-building, and sustained participation in multilateral institutions. This pattern suggests that Democratic lawmakers view global credibility and institutional leadership as more effective constraints on China's rise than overt ideological confrontation. In this framing, strengthening U.S. attractiveness and leadership capacity is seen as the primary mechanism for long-term strategic competition with China.

4.4 Republican Party: Framing China as an Existential, Ideological, and Security Threat

The Republican corpus consistently frames the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as the **primary existential threat** to the United States across economic, military, technological, and ideological domains. High-weight keywords such as *committee*, *communist*, *communist party*, and *foreign* indicate that Republican lawmakers view China not merely as a strategic competitor, but as a fundamentally hostile political system that requires sustained institutional confrontation. China is portrayed as an

authoritarian regime that actively exploits American openness—through universities, supply chains, financial markets, and technology ecosystems—to undermine U.S. sovereignty, security, and democratic values. This framing places China at the center of U.S. national-security discourse rather than treating it as one challenge among many.

A defining feature of the Republican narrative is its **institutional and legislative mobilization** against China, reflected in the prominence of terms such as *committee*, *purposes*, and *defense*. Republicans emphasize the need for whole-of-government action through congressional oversight, investigative committees, sanctions regimes, export controls, and investment restrictions. Rather than prioritizing diplomatic engagement or multilateral coordination, the party's rhetoric stresses domestic hardening—strengthening U.S. laws, restricting CCP-linked entities, blocking Chinese access to American capital and technology, and reshoring critical industries. This approach reflects a belief that the CCP's influence must be systematically constrained through legal and structural means within the United States itself.

Human rights and ideological conflict occupy a central place in Republican discourse, emphasizing **regime type and moral confrontation** as core interpretive lenses. Keywords and passages related to *people*, *communist*, and *threat* highlight repeated references to severe human rights abuses, including religious persecution, forced labor, organ-harvesting allegations, and repression in Xinjiang and Tibet. These issues are not treated as peripheral moral concerns but as evidence of the CCP's fundamentally authoritarian nature. Republican lawmakers argue that tolerating or economically empowering such a regime directly contradicts American values and ultimately weakens U.S. global leadership, making ideological difference a primary justification for confrontation rather than a secondary concern.

Economic security is another core pillar of the Republican framing, centering on **dependency reduction and industrial resilience**. Terms such as *manufacturing*, *critical*, *equipment*, *borrowing*, *debt*, and *oil* reflect deep concern over U.S. dependence on China for critical inputs, energy markets, capital flows, and industrial capacity. China is portrayed as leveraging global supply chains, debt diplomacy, and discounted energy purchases from Russia and Iran to strengthen authoritarian partners while hollowing out U.S. industrial competitiveness. Republicans argue that past U.S. trade and energy policies inadvertently accelerated China's rise and that decisive decoupling—particularly in critical minerals, advanced manufacturing, and defense-related technologies—is necessary to restore American strength.

Security threats beyond conventional military power are also heavily emphasized, highlighting **nontraditional and domestic-facing threats** linked to China. Keywords such as *fentanyl*, *equipment*, and *threat* illustrate how Republicans connect China to public health harms, cyber intrusions, telecom infrastructure vulnerabilities, and influence operations. China is framed as enabling American harm not only through geopolitical rivalry but also through indirect channels that erode domestic stability and governance. This broad threat perception supports an expansive definition of national security that encompasses public health, infrastructure, education, and technology governance.

Finally, the Republican narrative situates China as the central node of a broader authoritarian bloc, emphasizing **deterrence and containment within great-power competition**. References to Russia, Iran, and North Korea frequently position these states as interconnected challengers whose coordination amplifies risk to U.S. interests and allies. Cooperation with Taiwan, strengthening alliances, and confronting Beijing's influence abroad are consistently framed as necessary countermeasures. Unlike Democratic discourse that often centers institutional legitimacy and soft power, Republican rhetoric prioritizes containment, deterrence, and confrontation, reflecting the view that hesitation or accommodation will enable the CCP to expand its power at America's expense.

4.5   Comparative Synthesis and Implications

Taken together, the Democratic and Republican corpora reveal a clear partisan divergence in how China is conceptualized and how U.S. strategy should respond, with the **core divide centered on power competition versus ideological confrontation**. Democrats predominantly frame China as a systemic challenger to U.S. global leadership whose rise exploits gaps in multilateral engagement,
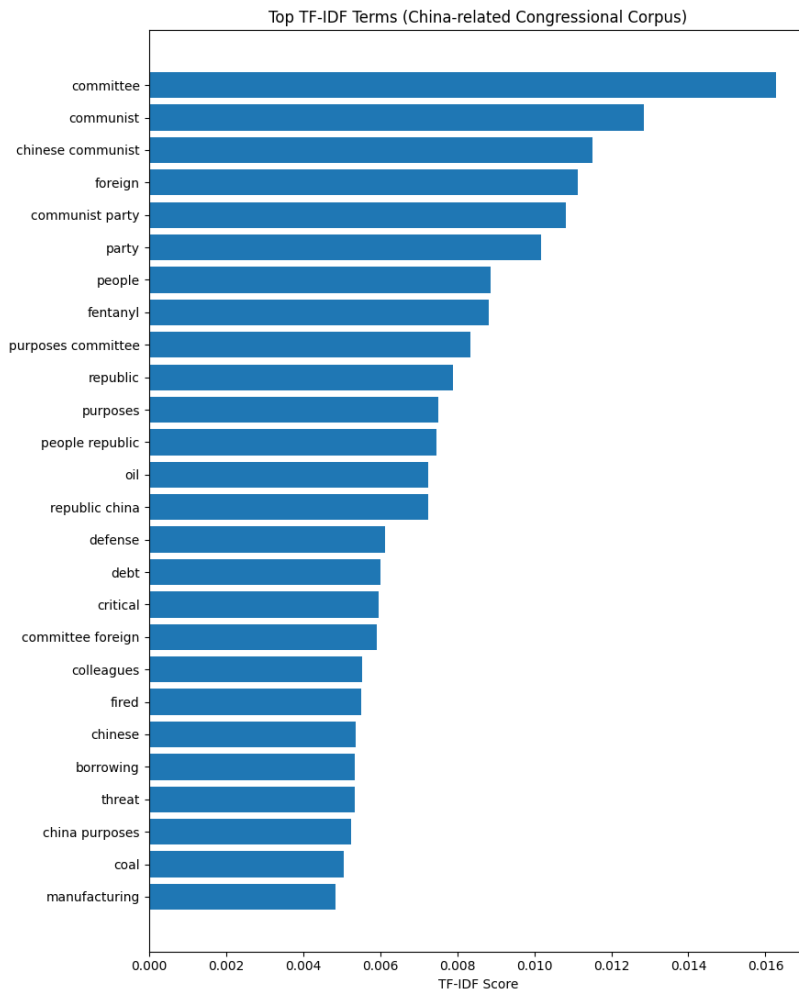
Figure 3: Top-tf-idf words from the Republican Party

soft power, clean energy investment, and international institutions. Republicans, by contrast, portray China—specifically the Chinese Communist Party—as an inherently hostile authoritarian regime whose ideology, repression, and infiltration pose existential threats to American security and values. This divergence shapes not only policy priorities but also the language through which China is discussed in Congress.

A central implication of this divide is the difference in perceived risk pathways, reflecting **distinct threat models**. Democratic rhetoric emphasizes external, forward-looking risks: loss of influence abroad, weakened alliances, retreat from global leadership, and China's ability to fill vacuums created by U.S. disengagement. Republican discourse focuses more heavily on internal vulnerabilities: infiltration of U.S. institutions, erosion of sovereignty, domestic security threats, and moral compromise through economic entanglement. As a result, Democrats tend to prioritize engagement, leadership restoration, and global competition, while Republicans prioritize restriction, decoupling, and internal defense.

This contrast also produces differing evaluations of policy tools, revealing **competing strategic logics**. Democrats view instruments such as USAID, clean-energy leadership, multilateral organizations, and alliance management as essential levers of long-term competition, arguing that weakening these tools—through tariffs, isolationism, or unilateral actions—undermines U.S. credibility and accelerates China's rise. Republicans, meanwhile, emphasize congressional oversight, sanctions, export controls, investment screening, and legislative enforcement as the primary means of constraining CCP power. These approaches are not merely tactical differences but reflect fundamentally different assumptions about how power is accumulated and defended in the international system.

Importantly, both parties converge on the recognition that China represents the United States' most significant long-term challenge, but diverge sharply on **what constitutes strength**. For Democrats, strength lies in global presence, institutional leadership, and the ability to shape international norms. For Republicans, strength lies in sovereignty, resilience, deterrence, and ideological clarity. This shared concern but divergent diagnosis helps explain the intensity of bipartisan attention to China alongside persistent disagreement over trade, foreign aid, technology policy, and alliance management.

Overall, the findings suggest that U.S. China policy is shaped less by disagreement over whether China is a challenge, and more by disagreement over **how power, values, and security interact**. These competing frames have significant implications for policy consistency, signaling to allies, and the credibility of long-term U.S. strategy. Understanding these partisan narratives is therefore critical for interpreting congressional behavior, forecasting policy trajectories, and assessing how domestic political competition shapes America's response to China's rise.

5   Applications for Policymakers and Institutions

This analytical framework supports decision-making across multiple policymaking and institutional contexts by providing systematic, empirical insight into U.S. policy discourse on China. Rather than relying on anecdotal impressions or isolated political signals, the framework enables policymakers and analysts to assess patterns of agreement, divergence, and constraint within key institutional arenas. By grounding strategic choices in observable legislative and institutional dynamics, the framework helps bridge the gap between political analysis and practical policy design.

In the context of legislative strategy and policymaking, the framework enables identification of policy domains where bipartisan consensus is most likely to support durable legislation. By mapping areas of alignment and fragmentation across issue areas, policymakers can better anticipate where legislative progress is feasible and where partisan divergence may impose binding constraints. This evidence-based understanding supports more effective agenda-setting, coalition-building, and committee strategy, allowing legislative actors to allocate political capital more strategically rather than reacting to short-term political noise.

For executive branch engagement, the framework provides a tool for aligning policy proposals with prevailing congressional narratives. By clarifying how different policy domains are framed and contested within Congress, executive agencies can anticipate oversight priorities and sources of political

resistance more accurately. This insight supports more effective executive–legislative communication and enhances interagency coordination by aligning policy design and messaging with congressional expectations across foreign policy, trade, technology, and national security domains.

The framework also serves as a foundation for policy research and institutional analysis. By offering a systematic way to track congressional discourse on China, it provides empirical grounding for think tank and academic research that seeks to move beyond normative debate toward evidence-based evaluation. The framework enables longitudinal analysis of how congressional attitudes toward China evolve across administrations and electoral cycles, supporting deeper understanding of institutional continuity and change. In doing so, it strengthens the quality and credibility of policy communication, public-facing analysis, and scholarly research.

6   Intended Users

The primary users of this framework include congressional staff and legislative analysts supporting members, committees, and leadership offices. For these users, the framework offers a structured way to interpret congressional discourse, assess strategic trade-offs, and support briefing, drafting, and oversight functions with empirical evidence. By clarifying patterns of agreement and contestation, the framework enhances institutional awareness and supports more informed legislative decision-making.

Executive branch policy offices engaged in U.S.–China strategy also represent a core user group. These offices operate at the intersection of foreign policy, trade, technology, and national security, where congressional dynamics often shape the feasibility and durability of executive action. The framework supports these users by clarifying congressional constraints and expectations, enabling more effective policy coordination and reducing the risk of misalignment between executive initiatives and legislative realities.

Policy research organizations and think tanks constitute another primary audience. For these institutions, the framework provides a scalable, transparent tool for analyzing congressional behavior and U.S.–China competition without relying solely on qualitative interpretation. By enabling comparative and longitudinal analysis, the framework strengthens institutional research capacity and supports the development of policy-relevant insights grounded in empirical patterns rather than selective case studies.

University-based policy and political science research centers also benefit from the framework's design. By focusing on applied analysis of legislative behavior, the framework supports academic research and training that connects theoretical inquiry with real-world policy processes. It offers a practical platform for studying institutional constraints, discourse evolution, and policy formation in the context of strategic competition.

Secondary users include journalists, educators, and civil society organizations seeking systematic insight into congressional discourse on China. While the framework is not designed for electoral forecasting, it provides a transparent and methodologically rigorous foundation for understanding the institutional forces shaping U.S. policy toward China. In this way, it contributes to more informed public discussion and supports evidence-based engagement with one of the most consequential policy challenges facing the United States.

7   Data Sources

The textual data used in this study are drawn from the official U.S. Congressional Record, which provides verbatim transcripts of floor debates and legislative proceedings in the House of Representatives and the Senate. All documents were accessed through Congress.gov and GovInfo, the authoritative repositories maintained by the Library of Congress and the U.S. Government Publishing Office.
https://www.congress.gov/congressional-record
https://www.govinfo.gov/app/collection/CREC